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Q&A for Health Professionals Expanded Air Quality Index Forecasting

What is the Air Quality Index (AQI)?

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is a tool used to report daily air quality. It tells you how clean or polluted your air is and it gives you associated health information. Currently, state and local governments provide AQI forecasts primarily for ground-level ozone during the summer months. Now, AQI forecasting will be expanded to include daily forecasts for particle pollution and will be available year-round. It will be one of the most effective ways for millions of Americans to proactively manage their health.

What is my role, as a health professional, in relation to expanded AQI forecasting?

Every year, millions of Americans are exposed to unhealthy levels of air pollution. Exposure to air pollution is associated with numerous effects on human health, including respiratory problems, admissions to hospitals and emergency rooms and even deaths from heart and lung diseases.

As a health professional, you provide an invaluable resource to the public. By educating and advising people about the health affects of air pollution, you can help people help themselves.

Who is affected by particle pollution?

- People with heart or lung diseases are vulnerable to particle pollution, including people with congestive heart disease, coronary artery disease, asthma, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- Older adults also are considered at risk, because they are more likely to have heart and lung disease.
- Children are likely at risk because their lungs are still developing. And over 6 million children have asthma in this country, making them even more vulnerable to particles.

What are the health implications of particles?

When particles aggravate heart and lung diseases, that, in turn, means increases in:

- Hospital admissions
- Doctor and emergency room visits
- Medication use; and
- Absences from work or school

Particle pollution is linked to significant public health risks – including death from heart and lung disease.



What action should people take when the air quality is unhealthy for particles?

You should advise your patients to check their local air quality forecast so they can protect themselves and their families. On a code red air quality day, everyone may be affected by air pollution. On a code orange air quality day, sensitive groups are more at risk. When particle pollution concentrations are expected to be high in your area, you should advise your patients to cut back or reschedule strenuous activities and protect their health.

Changing their plans can help reduce the amount of pollution that gets in their lungs. For more specific actions, visit EPA's Web site at www.epa.gov/airnow.